

# **FROM BLUES TO RAP**

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**FINBARR**

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*To my brother Martin*

*Francis Bebey's "African Music - A People's Art"*  
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ISBN 0 9529500 4 9

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Folkestone CT20 2QQ, England

I lay down last night, trying to take my rest.  
Lay down last night, ooh, trying to take my rest.  
My mind got to wandering like a wild goose in  
the west. (typical blues verse)

Blues music is not a pure African strain, miraculously preserved in the former slave states of America, but appears to be a blend of African and British traditional music. Slaves from many parts of Africa at first lacked both a common language and music, but shared a West African style of doing things. They heard white overseers singing, whistling or fiddle-playing, and so adapted the songs of England, Scotland and Ireland to this style. Field slaves, who created plantation music, had little to do with pseudo-aristocratic "Southern gentlemen", but took their orders and their punishment from rough emigrants who had themselves been "raised in cabins" – stone cabins set among Celtic fields. To my mind, there is a Celtic tinge to the blues, and Scotsmen and Irishmen often have an unusual feeling for this music. Fanny Kemble, in her Georgia slave plantation diary, describes how the slaves heard the song "Coming Through the Rye" and soon Africanised it into a tune of their own.

Nevertheless, it was not until the share-cropping days of the late nineteenth century that blues as we know it began to be heard among the cotton fields and around the cabin door. A typical blues song, whittled down to gramophone record length, contains five or six verses of three lines apiece. The two lines and a punch-line blues format, accompanied by a surging rhythm, is extraordinarily powerful, and evokes an atmosphere of age-old yet timeless mystery. How often have I felt a rush of excitement on hearing a Southern singer wail out a first line in that indescribable way that makes you feel certain that the line will be repeated and then followed by the rhyming line. Usually the line is repeated, inspiring leaps of ecstasy that jog my record player, but just as often it is not.

Most of the words in West African languages end in vowels, and so are hard to rhyme. The wailing sing-song style of West African music, often improvised, needs no rhymes. Echoes of this haunting music can be heard in London "white robe" or "spiritual churches" where West Africans and West Indians gather to

worship. An early style of blues, known as "free form", can still be heard in the American South, and on record by Robert Pete Johnson. Such blues appear to be sung almost absent-mindedly, the singer's thoughts pouring out as song. Johnson sang such personal songs, or proto-blues, while serving a long prison sentence. His songs usually have no rhymes, and it may be that field slaves who sang as they worked had no concept of rhyme at all.

As the slaves' knowledge of English increased, they began to add rhymes to their chants. Some singers repeated a line over and over until a rhyme suggested itself. Older forms of blues often have four, five or six lines before the punch-line. Perhaps each generation shed a line, until rhyming couplets appeared. In some archaic blues, the rhyming punch-line itself is repeated four or five times. English words are stretched out into African shapes, each phrase relished to the uttermost in mysterious repetition.

Songs from Britain, changed into blues, now re-cross the Atlantic and enrapture modern Britons more than did the originals. Long impervious to Negro music, white people have now capitulated to it all at once, to the risk of their own traditional music. When I was a boy, people sang "A Frog he would a-Wooing Go; 'Heigh ho' said Roley ..."

Nowadays, this ditty, with its "gammon and spinach" chorus, is all-but unknown. A three lines and a punch-line version has conquered all.

Froggy went a-courtin' and he did ride, mm-hmm,  
Froggy went a-courtin' and he did ride, mm-hmm,  
Froggy went a-courtin' and he did ride –  
Sword and a pistol by his side – mm-hmm.

A lesser known song, "The Gosport Tragedy", a murder ballad, has died out in its original form. But in the blues-style version, "Pretty Polly", it has taken root, I'm told, as a macabre children's song in Glasgow.

... I'm afraid of your ways,  
The way you've been rambling, you're leading me astray.  
Oh Polly, pretty Polly, your guess is about right.  
Polly, pretty Polly, your guess is about right.  
I was digging your grave, dear, the best part of last night.  
  
They went a little further, and what did she spy?  
They went a little further, and what did she spy?  
A freshly-dug grave with the spade standing by.

Both these songs, Froggy and Polly, are usually sung in America now by white "country" singers, to Kentucky banjo music originally learned from slaves (but no longer played by Negroes).

Some English blues fans believe that such songs should not be sung by white people. After all, a personal music like blues offers us a glimpse of the singer's soul, and who wants to see the soul of a suburban art student? However, white "country music" singers come from the same Southern states as do Negro blues singers, and sing the blues very creditably in their natural accents, once they have changed the words to suit their more sentimental frame of mind. Many "country songs" that are labelled "Blues" are not musical blues but Celtic-style Laments. In the American South there is a fascinating "two-way borrowing" between the "white" and the "black" styles of singing. There is also a two-way borrowing between Southern Plantation and Northern City music among Negroes, a borrowing between sacred and secular styles, and now even between American and Jamaican music. Less fashion-conscious than Negroes, "poor whites" often sing and play blues in bygone ways that black musicians have long discarded.

During the last burst of innovation and creativity in the Negro blues, in the late forties and early fifties, the "two lines and a punch-line" formula seemed such a natural style for all black people to use, that both ballad singers and rock'n'roll performers fell into it almost absent-mindedly. In the American South, there is a House Slave as well as a Field Slave tradition. House Slaves understood European music, and their descendants created not blues but jazz. Despite the popularity of blues, most American Negro audiences (particularly in Northern cities) have always preferred more sophisticated music, be it swing or "doo-wop" group harmony. Harmony music, as sung by innumerable groups with avian names (The Orioles, The Ravens, The Robins and so on) owed something to barber shop music and something to Negro church singing, secularised. It is one of the ancestors of Soul Music.

"Blues People", a book of essays by Leroi Jones, has been much acclaimed in Britain. The title, like many a blues song, has more than one meaning. Just as housewives in South Wales divide their neighbours into "tidy people" and "not tidy people", and warn their children to stay away from the latter, so do American Negro housewives speak of "church people" and "blues people". "Blues people" are not respectable, and their dangerous way of living is linked to their music. Young people who heed their mother and listen to church (or "gospel") music are likely to stay out of trouble. In the American South, your choice of music seems to define who you are.

However, in the late fifties, the chasm between gospel music and blues was bridged by a new style – "soul music". When a blues singer chose to sing a conventional love song in his or her grainy "blues voice", the result was often labelled "a soul ballad". A vague but popular form of "black nationalism" appeared in Negro America, that drew its style from church life, secularised. Church members had always called one another "Brother" or "Sister", and ideally were supposed to be a second family to one another. In the "soul movement", all American Negroes were, most idealistically, supposed to regard their whole race as one struggling and mutually helpful family. The query "Is he a Brother?" or "Is she a Sister?" now

meant "Is so-and-so a black person?" This way of thinking and speaking has never died out. It has spread to the new Black Britain, and has influenced the white feminist movement, or "sisterhood". Much of the original idealism that inspired early soul music has evaporated, leaving only a young man's greeting to a pretty girl ("Hi, sister!") as a reminder of the time when church language inspired a Utopian vision. For a decade or so, the word "Soul" seemed to symbolise "Blackness". Devotees of soul music, in its early days, felt as if they belonged to a Church of Black Togetherness.

"Soul ballads" became "soul music", and the two lines and a punch-line poetic but often naughty blues was at long last eclipsed (but bided its time in the darkness). Gospel songs and tunes were taken over by optimistic Black Utopians, neither church people nor blues people, and the old divisions were blurred. Tortuous jerky and impassioned love songs were interspersed with preacher-like shouts of "Can I get a witness, y'all?" Chinua Achebe, the Biafran novelist, describes a similar occasion in his novel of Old Nigeria, "Arrow of God". The dominant python-worshipping religion is about to crash and be replaced by Christianity. Young men suddenly begin to sing secular work songs to the tunes of python hymns, scandalising the religious and amusing the others.

Negro parents in America could not condemn soul music as they had once condemned blues. However, soul music eventually spent its force. Soul singers could not do without a white audience, who drew the teeth of the music and helped to turn it into soulless Disco. In the South, the blues crept back, and in the Northern cities, "rap" and then "Gangsta rap" appeared. "Rap" could be termed the revenge of the Blues People. Everything that parents and preachers had disliked in blues – casual references to promiscuity and violence – is exaggerated and glorified in Rap, to the exclusion of anything else. The old division between church people and rowdy people has returned. This time the rowdies are in the ascendancy, since both blues and rap have been given a seal of approval and are legitimised, so to speak, by a new, influential and amoral white audience. Church people, whose good influence should not be underestimated, have no white intellectual audience for their gospel songs.

Most of the intellectual interest in the blues began in England, during the late nineteen-fifties. Since many white Americans regard England as the "Home of Culture", this English interest in blues spread to America. These young white enthusiasts regarded blues as a form of "folk music". However, to English people, folk music means "bygone music" or "extinct music" that ought to be revived by educated enthusiasts. As English folk songs record a long vanished way of life, their singers today have to *act* the parts of milkmaids, cattle drovers, farmers' boys, wagoners' lads and even coal miners. In a sense, an English folk singer, who performs in a "folk club", is playing "Let's pretend". A man who sings "I am a jolly sailor" is really a jolly computer operator. Therefore the folk music enthusiast cannot understand that the blues is *real*.

Such a person can sing "Gonna shoot that woman, catch the 'Cannonball'", and never seriously think that anyone anywhere is going to be shot. Having sung half a dozen ditties in which he blithely promises to kill his woman, cut his rival with a knife, use black magic on someone or escape from prison, the English singer of blues berates the black American "church people" for trying to stop their children from listening to blues (or rap).

Among sharecroppers in the rural South, during the Southern heyday of blues (1920-1955), crimes of passion were as frequent as they are now in city "ghettos", and for the same reason. In America, as increasingly in Britain, the police are as, a rule not interested in crimes committed against black people. Negroes in America may be frequently *arrested* by the police, but they are not *protected* by the police. Often they have to live in an uncertain atmosphere of day-to-day violence, in places where law and order have not broken down, but have never been established.

"I'm gonna murder my baby" sang the blues guitarist Pat Hare, on Sun Records of Memphis. Not long after the song was recorded, he did just that, and went to prison. Blues are songs that are personal to their singers, not oft-repeated traditional folk songs. Most blues singers both compose their own songs and put their personal stamp on songs composed by others. Not all such songs are autobiographical, but nearly all are based on real incidents or the experiences of people known to the singer. Ever since the nineteen-twenties, blues have been popularised by sale of records as much as by live performances. Modern professional blues writers, such as George Jackson and Percy Mayfield, compose blues with particular recording artists in mind. Today the "blind man on the corner singing the blues" is likely to have his songs stolen, copyrighted and recorded by somebody else. Commercial recording studios that began with the humble aim of selling records to local black people in America now sell to a world audience.

Blues and gospel songs are therefore not traditional songs but fairly recent traditional *styles*. "Floating verses" of age-old rhymes are inserted in new autobiographical blues. If the singer is composing the blues as he sings it, these verses give him time to think of his own lines. If he is making a record, they help to pad it out. As these traditional verses are well-loved by those who know the blues, they are usually greeted with enthusiasm and cries of "All right!"

Some of these verses may have been lifted from Scottish ballads, and also occur in sea shanties sung by white sailors until the nineteen-thirties. (However, sea shanties themselves were heavily influenced by Caribbean Negro sea songs.)

Dig my grave with a silver spade  
And let me down with a golden chain ...

Other blues verses obviously began in the Negro South.

Some got six months, some got a solid year,  
But me and my partner, we got lifetime here.

"Floating verses" are also used by gospel singers, whose songs are not individualistic but co-operative, adapted for choir singing. The "Dig my grave" verse also occurs in gospel songs, and the following typical "gospel verse" also turns up in secular communal worksongs or wailed by unfortunates on chain gangs or in prison farms:

If I could I surely would  
Stand on the rock where Moses stood.

"The blind man on the corner singing the blues", a stock character and a stock phrase used in blues composed by W.C. Handy in the twenties, and Bobby Bland in the sixties, bears witness to the importance of blind singers in the development of blues, from Blind Lemon Jefferson to Blind Willie McTell and to the late Ray Charles. "Living in a world of darkness" (as Bobby Bland puts it), seems to stimulate the creative imagination. (In the eighteenth century, few English country entertainments were complete without a blind fiddler..

I'm drifting and drifting like a mermaid on the foam ... (Jefferson)

Take my advice, let those married women be.

If a husband catch you, he'll beat you ragged as a city tree! (McTell)

It's a big jump from the twenties and thirties, when Jefferson and Mc Tell sang on the street corners of America, to the sophisticated recording studios where the blind Southern singer Ray Charles was most at home. In his days of greatest fame, the early sixties, Charles could justifiably be considered a blues singer, with a fondness for the songs of a thirties bluesman, Leroy Carr. Like Carr, and unlike guitarists Jefferson and Mc Tell, Ray Charles was a piano player. He was a key figure who helped to create "soul music" by singing the blues to gospel music rhythms, with a girl group for "call and response" singing.

When I first heard his pioneering song "What'd I Say?" I had not listened to very much gospel music, and I wrongly took it for granted that Charles was consciously trying to sound African. New and increasingly urban song styles from Black America grew more and more African, as the Celtic "poor white" influences within the blues were discarded. Although jazz musicians, a more urbane breed, purposely experimented with African rhythms, blues and soul singers seemed to take the same path merely by leaving the South and moving to Northern cities.

A happy legacy of slavery in the South is the fact that Black people and white people are used to the sight of one another, and can now "pass the time of day" with one another, at least on a superficial level. Despite segregation and prejudice, blues and hillbilly singers and musicians often played together and helped one another. Black people played in mainly-white "country music" groups, often

teaching their styles to the white performers. In their turn, the white performers could act as patrons and protectors of the black singers. In 1923, blues singer Mississippi John Hurt was given his first chance to play in a band by a white blues-singing square dance fiddle player, Willie Narmour. Thirty years later, another up-and-coming blues singer, Son Seals, was helped in his career by an Arkansas hillbilly guitarist, Jimmy Grubbs, who invited the youth to join his band. "Man, that long tall redneck could play!" Seals recently told a reporter from "Blues Revue" magazine. Ray Charles, too, once played for a "hillbilly group".

Such facts are often obscured because blues singers themselves frequently say "Blues is an old music brought from Africa", and "poor whites" often express dislike for black people. "Black people are just about ruining America! They don't do nothing but live on relief, and they don't like us waving Confederate flags, or re-enacting the Civil War", an Alabama belle told me earnestly. "Why, hi there, Viola, how's Otis and the family? This here's Viola (introduces black girl, beamingly). She works along o' me in the store..."

Travel several miles to the north west, outside the South, and you meet city liberals who sincerely weep tears over the plight of black people, but never meet them, and studiously avoid all places where they are likely to do so. ("I heard that neighbourhood's 'going down'")

Once he has moved to a city outside the South, the average American black person ceases to meet or mix with white people. As if possessed by a spirit of African-ness *within*, his musical tastes and styles grow more African and less Celtic in tone. Since share-cropping ended in the nineteen-fifties, an enormous Negro migration North has ensued, and the whole balance of Negro folklore and influence has shifted from the cotton plantation and the South to the totally black ghettos of the North. Styles of music still travel from South to North and back, but now the emphasis is on "North to South". Northern black music blares from radios in plantation shacks all over the South. The new style, "rap", has evolved from "soul" through various intermediary styles, such as "funk" and "hip hop".

"Funk", an impassioned yet withal cheerful style of dance music, was pioneered by James Brown. A Southerner like Ray Charles, Brown picked up Charles's mantle and embroidered on it, adding a Latin touch of "rumba blues" to create a fiery new rhythm. Although he often professes a dislike of blues, James Brown's early records are all in the "two lines and a punch-line" mode. Arthur Crudup, the blues singer who inspired Elvis Presley, was a frequent visitor at Brown's boyhood home, since Brown senior was a noted singer of both blues and spirituals.

Both James Brown and Ray Charles, steeped in the blues, gave their individual styles of music to the city North. There these styles developed their own momentum among younger musicians. Brown and Charles were the last Southerners to influence the tide of black American music. Following their musical decline, in the seventies, the mechanical North was to have it all its own way. In the South,

laws prevented marriage between black and white, yet liaisons occurred. No legal barriers ever prevented marriage between races in the North. Yet if people cannot meet, they cannot marry. Aware of the archaic nature of blues, blues singers nowadays talk of African ancestors, forgetting that many of their ancestors must have been white people. "Funk" is a music that has instant appeal in Africa, and James Brown is a hero in Zaire, the former Belgian Congo. "Hip hop" and now "rap" have trimmed "funk" down to a sparse drum rhythm that would be wholly African were it not so mechanical and "soulless". (Incidentally, the word "funk" only means "sweat". Like the word "blues", it is of English, not African, origin. I have just re-read the schoolboy classic, "The Fifth Form at St. Dominic's", by Talbot Baines Reed, first published in 1887. In it, the slangy schoolboys speak of "the blues", or ennui, of "getting funky" and even of "being in a blue funk". "Funk" in those days meant "getting in a sweat of cowardice". Whereas in today's Black America "funky" sweat pours down from couples dancing in stuffy basements or love-making upstairs.)

The American South is still a land of song, while the Northern cities are places of Mechanical Invention. When Southern blues guitarists moved North in the late forties, they at first combined the spirits of both places by playing instruments that were in part machine-electric guitars with amplifiers. Hawaiian guitar styles, played on electric guitars, were soon developed into an exciting style of blues playing in which the guitar could sound like a "wind instrument", perhaps a soaring flute or an alto saxophone, and then turn back to a strumming guitar once more. In a flash, this style bounced back to the South, and speedily conquered the many little clubs, "lounges", "juke joints" and "beer joints" where such blues is still played today.

However, the children and grandchildren of emigrant musicians, those who were born in the North, preferred playing with machines to playing musical instruments. They kept the amplifier but threw out the guitar. Today, "black music" in America, England and even the Caribbean is dominated by the technical skills of young men adept in electronics, capable of slowing and speeding taped music, of reversing tapes, cutting them up and joining them together. Drums are replaced by drum-machines, "programmed" to produce fast, slow or steady rhythms. African polyrhythms are created not by musicians but by banks of tapes controlled by wizard technicians, almost all young black men. Unable to play music, the new baseball-capped whizz-kids can make music by playing fancy computer games with assorted tapes, particularly those of James Brown's group, the Famous Flames. So Southern blues-tinged music survives in a cold, surrealistic space-age form. Enter Rap.

As I only have visited the Southern States of America, I tend to refer to all the other States as "the North". My "North", therefore, includes most of the West, including California, Los Angeles, and particularly the black quarter of Watts, home of "Gangsta rap". So many Southern Negroes moved to California in the

forties that West Coast styles of jazz and blues developed, a music lighter and more sophisticated than its Southern ancestors. Record labels sprang up to cater for the new black audience. The first wholly non-Southern "black music" was Hip-Hop, innocuous and mechanical drumbeat music to which Brooklyn children could dance in the street and perhaps earn a few pennies from amused passers-by. As Hip-Hop gave way to Rap, New York gave way to Los Angeles as the spiritual centre of America. Negro fashion drags All-American and almost All-World fashion in its wake, and dreamers all over the world who yearn to go to America now yearn not for New York but for Los Angeles.

Rap music, all mechanical drumbeats and rapid-fire non-stop rhymes, seems to be the logical conclusion, if not the end, of traditional American Negro music. Instead of line after line in search of a far distant and sometimes never-arriving rhyming punch-line, Rap music includes as many rhymes as the singers can invent, one after the other. Although one of the influences of Rap is Jamaican "rude boy" music (itself "mechanised" but originally inspired by American blues), Rap has roots in both gospel music and blues: "Gangsta Rap" in particular shows a similarity to blues, more in subject-matter than in style. Funny spellings, perhaps meant to evoke the world of boys who hate school, help to "defuse" alarming words such as "gangsters" and "niggers". In Rap parlance, black people proudly call one another "niggaz". ("Although white outside, inside I am a nigga", a white fan wrote to a Rap magazine.)

Since my thirteen-year old nephew Careless (his "tag name") is a devotee of Gangsta Rap artist Snoop Doggy Dogg, my knowledge of Gangsta Rap is limited to what I can overhear from his tapes. Dogg's songs are half-recited, half-sung in a threatening monotone. (The word "rap" itself comes from Harlem jive talk – to rap your lips together is to speak). Drum machines and weird echoing studio effects form a background to Dogg's drone-like rhymes about shooting people, taking drugs, abusing women in various ways, dealing in drugs and gloating over the money he makes. Women are always referred to as "whores" (pronounced "hoes") or "bitches". Tender love ballads are noticeable by their absence, but Dogg is capable of singing in soft blues-like tones, both poignant and jaunty.

Walking down the road smoking Indo,  
With my mind on my money and my money on my mind.

(Indo, I presume, is some kind of drug.) Nearly all successful blues singers have at some time recorded a song on a Dogg-like theme. There is a recognised type of "boasting about women and money" blues, though nearly always sung with humorous intention. Blues about shooting or cutting up women abound, including the popular and infamous "A to Z" blues, about a man who dreams of cutting each letter of the alphabet on a woman who has displeased him in some way. Literacy has its pitfalls. Even the first blues ever recorded, by a woman (Mamie

Smith) in the twenties carries lines that would be the envy of Dogg, Ice-T or any of their L.A. rivals.

I'm gonna do like a Chinaman, go and get some hop;  
Get myself a gun and shoot myself a cop. ("Crazy Blues")

Even a sophisticated jazzman such as Jelly Roll Morton, when plied with drink by folklorist Alan Lomax, sang would-be humorous ditties about raping "hoes and bitches". Morton's very nickname is more audacious than those of most rap artists. A nineteen-fifties blues singer called himself "the Gangster of Love", while an earlier singer declared:

You can start your screaming, but must give in.  
I'm gonna tear you to pieces and put you back again.  
I've got the gangster's blues, I got the gangster's blues,  
I've got the gangster's blues – boys, I'm feeling mean.

However, to a blues singer, a song like this is just one song from his repertoire, sung when he is in a certain mood. For the blues singer, unlike the rap singer, the murder-cum-rape song is seldom his be-all and end-all. Most blues singers, men and women, prefer to portray themselves as helpless individuals, buffeted by fate, but wryly determined to see their troubles in a comic light. Boasting songs of irresistibility to thousands of lovers who queue or fight for favours alternate with realistic tales of lost love or woeful accounts of going to prison. However, rap singers stick to the one theme, and with nary a smile, portray themselves as broodingly omnipotent, forever in power and in total command of their neighbourhoods.

Even so, and despite the tedium of rap, the rap singer and the blues singer both live in a world that's *real*. Snoop Doggy Dogg, as I write, is in police trouble over a shooting incident. Blues singers try to keep out of trouble, but sing about it when they fail. "Gangsta Rappers" almost want to court trouble, as a label of authenticity. Strenuously, they point out that they still belong to a drug-dealing street gang. Blues singers, as a rule, only become popular with white people when they start losing their black audience. "Gangsta Rappers", if well-known, have both a black and a white following at the same time. Such singers have created a new "Negro stereotype" and folk-hero, the teenage pimp, drug-dealer, gangster and murderer. Admired as much for his obscene language as for his propensity for rape and murder, the Rappin' Gangsta, a semi-mythical figure, has achieved that which Paul Robeson and Martin Luther King could not do, and earned the world's respect for the American Negro. This goes to show the bad shape the world is in.

Quickly recognising Gangsta Rap as the new blues, black church leaders and responsible parents in America rightly try to shield their children from its influence. Rap rhythms, bereft of "gangsta" lyrics, have pervaded everywhere. Fast Rap interludes in gospel songs are now a commonplace. In a sense, Rap has come

full circle, since fast-rhyming half-sung half-spoken stories in verse have long formed a small but important part of the spiritual and gospel-singer's repertoire. Such "religious raps" date back to the days of slavery, when one literate Christian would set Bible stories to rhyme for the benefit of his bookless fellows. "Spoken songs" about Noah and Jonah are common.

Jonah didn't want to heed God's command – he went and bought a ticket to Tarshish land.

Well, he bought his ticket, he got on board, the ship went a-sailing away from the shore,

But the Lord God caused a storm to arise – the captain and the crew had trouble in mind ...

... Wake up, Jonah! Wake up, man! God's gonna destroy this whole band!

Thus rap the Sensational Nightingales, on Malaco Records, in a rhythm recognisable to Snoop Doggy Dogg, but in warm, human and expressive tones. Strangely enough, most gospel groups from the earliest days of recording to the present have specialised in secular rap-style spoken-songs on dramatic current events, often with a Biblical moral tagged on at the end. Both World Wars and the sinking of the Titanic have undergone this treatment. President Roosevelt, a great hero to American Negroes in his day, often features in such rhymes.

Only two Presidents for whom I've ever felt,  
Abraham Lincoln and Roose-er-Velt.

Rap music has conquered the South, and Southern Rappers have now appeared, minus "Gangsta" lyrics and with spiritual church-like girl choruses in the background. But compared to Dogg and his L.A. kennel-mates, their rapping is not very popular. Brutal and obscene rhymes called "toasts", never before put on record, are a vital ingredient in Rap. Jamaican "chat" or "dub" is another Rap ancestor. Leaving the History of Rap to be written by somebody who actually enjoys the music, I shall now have a look at contemporary rap-influenced blues records.

During the last forty years or so, a "white bohemian" class has arisen in America. For the most part, these young male bohemians, bare-armed and T-shirted, work among computers or as technicians in records, radio or television studios. Unlike previous bohemian generations, they have few artistic skills. This new coarse white bohemia forms the main audience for so-called "black music". Most blues records, and all blues magazines, are issued and re-issued for its benefit. This is good news for blues singers, but bad news for the blues, as versifiers no longer address themselves to "the black grapevine". Thus the music loses a lot of its forcefulness as a guide to Black America.

In the South, where bohemians are few, some record labels still cater for non-rapping Negro tastes. There is Malaco of Mississippi, Maison de Soul of Louisiana and Ichiban of Georgia. None of these companies confine themselves to recording local singers, and most of their bluesmen are Texans. John Abbey, the managing director of Ichiban Records, is an Englishman. His kinsman Gof Abbey runs the English (retail only) branch at the Park Royal Trading Estate, near Harlesden, in the heart of Black London.

A cordial soul, Gof recently gave me an armful of long-playing blues records, all newly released in the South, and I took them home and listened to them. All the record labels (that is, companies) that I mention produce *every* kind of American Black music, with the exception of work songs and children's play songs, styles which are taken for granted in the South and are unsellable. Blues are only a very small part of "the soul business", just as hillbilly bluegrass music forms a small but undying part of the vast Country and Western industry.

Gof told me that Ichiban hope to attract the white bohemian market for blues, and are trying to get their singers engagements at outdoor festivals. To my delight, he admitted that they were having scant success. By the white bohemian criterion, the years a blues singer spends in small Negro clubs and dives are the years of oblivion and obscurity. With a white Festival following assured, the blues singer has "arrived". ("So B.B. King, tell me of the heartbreak years before you were 'discovered', when you only played to black people ...")

Huge outdoor audiences, in field or stadium, are not a natural habitat for a creative blues singer. Such a man, in his youth, may have played and sung outdoors to relatively small crowds of black or white people at Southern country picnics. Together with a band, he would probably also play amplified blues in small-town "juke joints", or low dives. At his peak, he would play the city "Lounges", refined and less violent versions of juke joints. White recognition might then follow. Yet the best bluesmen return to the juke joints and lounges for the pleasure of being with a blues audience they can understand and feel jokily at home with, even after they have become household names at bohemian Festivals and European concert halls. The late Lightning Hopkins and Sonny Boy Williamson II returned to the Lounges whenever they could, and even the all-but Anglicised duo of Sonny Terry and Brownie McGhee have been heard not long ago playing up a storm in an all-black basement club in the lawless Washington ghetto. My informant tells me that, to whoops from a wildly appreciative audience, they sang a blatant double-meaning song, "Bad Blood", involving a doctor and female patient.

Double meanings and "entendres", once mind-boggling in their complexity, have all but vanished from modern Ichiban blues. Downright crude language, complete with "single entendres", is now used instead. Such songs were known at one time as "party blues". Strong language is evidently needed if blues is to beat off its competitor, rap. Although I sympathise with the church people who condemn blues, I must admit that blues thrives under such condemnation. Should

blues ever become respectable, it will lose part of its function and dwindle into an extinct folk music. Today there is a great deal of talk about "making blacks proud of their blues heritage". B.B. King, a bluesman now respected by black people because of the money he made from white people, used to be ashamed to tell middle class Negroes that he was a blues singer. Today he campaigns for Blues Pride. I see what he means, but pride goes before a fall.

Griots, the wandering troubadours of West Africa, are both welcome visitors wherever they go, and social outcasts. People lock up their daughters then flock to hear the griots play. Griots, like blacksmiths, are said to commune with evil spirits, whence comes their inspiration. Players of stringed instruments, griots make music that somewhat resembles blues. However, their lyrics are usually praise songs for local bigwigs, not humorous complaints or cries of individual pain.

In his interesting book "The Bluesman", Julio Finn declares that blues singers are devotees of a pre-Christian religion. Finn himself has a blues background – he is the brother of a well-known blues singer, Billy Boy Arnold. Anyone can see that the blues has an element of magic in it, but there is no organised African religion in America except Christianity. (The so-called "Nation of Islam" is a political organisation.) To make his case, Julio Finn quotes many songs composed by Willie Dixon, a prolific blues composer of the music's early fifties musical heyday. Dixon wrote blues with certain singers in mind, and seldom sang them himself. He was brought up in town, not on a plantation, and grew up in a tradition of church singing and popular harmony music. Having been told that the blues "is the music of the devil", he seized on that fact and glorified it. Of course the American Negro devil derives some of his character from the African trickster blacksmith god, Legba. Stories often depict him as a buffoon, too cunning for his own good.

White bohemian singers of blues are clearly inspired by the Satanic, omnipotent and coldly Byronic European devil, cross-bred with the Nordic god Woden. In England and Scandinavia, young people who take up blues often go on to produce songs that revive pagan memories of Thor, Woden, Loki and the Nordic pantheon.

Ichiban and Malaco blues singers very often dedicate their long-playing records to God ("without Whose help this record could not have been made"). It looks odd to see the song titles side by side with such a Heavenly dedication – "I Want to Funk With You" or "I Want to Play with your Poodle".

There is a special exciting atmosphere about a record made by a label that caters for Negroes. Until the nineteen-sixties, only single (two song) records had been made for "black consumption". When LPs became popular and affordable in Black America, the sleeve notes on the back often recalled the bragging adverts for blues parties (American or Jamaican) once printed on cards and stuck on walls here and there. As in the glory days of Jamaican ska music, in the sixties, modern blues records tend to have thick blue middles and mis-spelled song titles. Often

the mis-spellings are prompted by an African-style inability to pronounce English words (as in Stevie Wonder's "He's Mistra Know-it All"). Whenever I see mis-spellings, I lick my lips, as I know I'm in for a musical treat. Pictures on such LP sleeves sometimes show a glamour girl in place of the elderly male singer who might actually be singing the songs.

Whenever a modern blues song carries a "Warning: Offensive Lyrics" label, you may be sure that the word "nigger" is going to crop up somewhere. In unofficial or "real" America, this word has never gone out of currency among white people or black. Respectable alternatives irritate me by their changeability, rapidly altering as white bigots turn them into epithets (As I write, "African Americans" is the approved term. To my mind, the phrase conjures up lawyers and academics, and I prefer to stick with good old Negroes such as Paul Robeson and John Henry).

Listening to Ichiban blues records, I was at first put off by the savagely crashing drum rhythms reminiscent of rap, but not played by machines. Early blues songs, like early hillbilly songs, usually had no drum backing, although foot-tapping often filled the breach. Drums, when they came, had a light touch, propelling the music along in the background and never drowning out the words. The harsh drums of Ichiban, luckily, serve mainly to introduce a song and make it sound rappingly modern. After a few seconds they subside into nineteen-fifties style blues drumming. In fact Ichiban blues, and modern Southern blues in general, proved better than I would have thought possible.

Gary 'Blues Boy' Coleman, guitarist and all-purpose blues arranger, is the star and mainstay of Ichiban. Unknown to white people, he is a popular "Lounge" singer in the Black South, sometimes mentioned in songs by other bluesmen. He hails from Texas, but I first came across him playing in Mississippi. Malaco's prize bluesman, Little Milton, is a veteran of the "Sun Records" blues and share-cropping heyday, but young one-footed Coleman is a veteran in the making. It is odd to hear, in these modern blues, references to the world of Welfare instead of the steel mill or plantation world of Work. Mentions of "food stamps" and "welfare cheques" are common. Other songs evoke lines of unexpected sophistication – "I woke up one morning, found a message on my machine..."

Other singers, on various labels, unknown to most white people outside the South, are Johnnie Taylor (and Little Johnnie Taylor), Blues Boy Artie White, the magnificent, moody Little Joe Blue (now dead) and the amiable and talented Texan blues singer, Jabo. All these singer-guitarists enjoy an enthusiastic black audience. "Maison de Soul's" Jabo (Donald Glenn) is a remarkable performer, who also plays accordion. One of his band, Li'l Jabo, plays the washboard with thimble fingers.

There seems to be a mood of despair among poor American black people. Gone is the "we can make it" optimism of soul music. In the South there are obvious gains – black people now work alongside white people in shops and offices. In the

North there are hived-off jobs for educated black people in "Blackademe" (Afro-American studies for lecturers and perpetual students). Elsewhere, Black Pride and White Fear have removed humble Negroes from the servant class while providing only Welfare doles to take its place. Some react with rage, to the accompaniment Rap, others try to see the wryly humorous side of things – hence the small-scale renaissance of blues.

I little thought I would ever hear such lines as these, from Jabo, on a modern blues record.

... I'm going back home, where a poor black man belong.

Until the advent of Rap, blues songs in praise of drugs were common. Modern blues singers, to their credit, regard crack cocaine with horror. One that I spoke to, when I briefly visited the American South in 1986, had lost a daughter to "crack". Too young, for the most part, to have teenage children, "Gangsta Rappas" are full of praise for drugs.

"Down in Louisiana, just a mile from Texarkana in them old cotton fields at home" I travelled in search of bluesmen and found big Jimmy "The Preacher" Ellis plugging in his amplified guitar in a road-side "Lounge". With the help of a drum machine, and with a harmonica in his shirt pocket, he was a one-man band. Born among the cotton fields of Arkansas, he had been a boy preacher, a soldier, a boxer and a bass guitarist for Little Joe Blue. A warm-hearted, friendly man, he invited me to come back later that evening, when he would be playing for dancing.

So I did, and that evening is one of the highlights of my life. Like the young Muddy Waters, he interspersed blues songs with country and western ditties, probably for my benefit as a white visitor. Although many of Jimmy's blues were of my favourite "two lines and a punch-line" variety, his own favourites had conventional lines, but blues phrasing. One of these was the magnificent slow blues classic, "Key to the Highway", a song that began life as a prison farm ditty, "Key to the Bushes". If you "take the key" to the bushes, you become a hunted fugitive from prison, with Rattler the bloodhound on your track. (At one time, every prison-farm had a hound called "Rattler".) Fortunately for Jimmy, the Key to the Highway merely involves hobo-ing away from one woman in search of another.

The other song that Jimmy liked had no repetitive lines at all, but also no rhymes. Can "blank verse" be the future of the blues? If so, the blues has "gone full circle". This song was "Still Called the Blues", at that time newly recorded on Malaco by Johnnie Taylor. As I write, a popular non-repetitive sparsely-rhymed blues sung by Narvel Felts for Ichiban (and also by the irrepressible Jabo on Maison de Soul) is "Nine Pound Steel", a prison song. As in "Key", it seems based on a Southern saying, "... and before you know it, you're saying 'Good Morning' to a nine pound steel." This is the steel hammer used by convicts, as celebrated in many sad Southern songs.

One of the lines in "Key to the Highway" is definitely lifted from an Irish ballad – "When the moon comes over the mountain". In slavery days, in America, as far back as seventeenth-century colonial times, the drum was prohibited as a Negro instrument. Slave owners knew that it could be used as a "voice" to send messages and rally unbeaten souls to an uprising. In the gap left by the drum, the "Celtic tinge" sneaked in, just as it is now being squeezed out again, with the drum's return. Slaves in towns were fascinated by military drumming, which helped to inspire the more sophisticated "house slave" music of jazz.

There is more than a mere "African tinge" in country and western music. A tinge is only a tinge, and I don't want to steal the African-ness from the blues singer. Francis Bebey's description of West African griots in "African Music – A People's Art", could also apply to blues singers in their heyday. Blues guitarists were sometimes said to have acquired their skills from the devil and supposedly could not enter Heaven unless they renounced their art. Bebey describes an innocent weaver who received a vision in which "dwarf-genies" inspired him to take up the lute his ancestors had played and become a musician. So he dusted off the family lute, sacrificed a chicken and set to work, or rather began to play.

Some griots do dabble in witchcraft. They usually specialise in the art of invoking supernatural beings of all kinds and sing their praises in order to ensure their pardon, protection or goodwill ... music is the vital part of all the griot's activities ... although the talents of these extraordinary musicians are much admired, it must be admitted that they rarely enjoy personal esteem ... In some parts of West Africa, griots were not allowed the right to a proper burial ... The disrespect and scorn shown to the griot by his own community has the rather dubious advantage of illustrating some of the general problems indigenous to the African artist in society. Recent conferences on African art and culture have reproached Africans, sometimes in rather harsh terms, for not always recognising the true place of the artist in society: that is to say, in a new African society that has evolved considerably from traditional African communities. Governments and cultural centres are being urged to study the problem of the African artist in hopes of according him his rightful place – a place of honour, needless to say.

... The art of the griot is essentially contemplative ... individualistic and pre-eminently self-interested. It is not orientated to the future, but firmly entrenched in the past. It is not a collective art form; this is a distinct disadvantage in societies where art is regarded as a communal undertaking. When the griot speaks or sings, he expects immediate attention and he is ready with an insult if such attention is not forthcoming.

Meanwhile, back at the Lounge, Jimmy was thoroughly enjoying himself with the bad-man ballad of the rap-toaster's hero, gambler Stagger Lee. In some versions of the song, S. Lee made a pact with the devil, but Jimmy stuck closely

to the 1959 hit record version, putting down the guitar and flailing a keyboard to produce the dynamic circling, swirling rhythm that ended each verse, to the cry of "Go, Stagger Lee!"

Years after I had said goodbye to Jimmy and walked off down the moonlit road, I heard the same swirling, circling rhythm played by Jamaican Pentecostal church musicians in London's East End. A middle-aged banjo player and a young electric-guitarist exuberantly played the "Stagger Lee swirl" as an extended chorus of a gospel song. Whenever they finished and immediately began again, the preacher leaped to his feet and swung his arm round and round to illustrate the ringing music. Everyone stamped their feet and shouted "All right!", even me.

Some West Indians in England have learned to play blues, usually by copying records, though some may have heard the music on crop-picking expeditions to the American South. During a recent summer, the "Mason's Arms" pub, on the Harrow Road, near Harlesden, presented a Mississippi-like aspect. Strolling by with the dog, on a warm evening, I could hear the lilt of country and western music coming from the brightly lit downstairs bar, full of Irishmen. Through the window of the upstairs bar, high over the busy Harrow Road, I could both hear and see a black bluesman play an electric guitar with fervent intensity. As the young man sang two lines and a punch-line, a drummer drummed and an all black crowd danced slowly.

Despite such occasional surprises, the blues can find no roots or fertile ground in England. There is enormous interest in blues and jazz among white people, and it could be said that blues-and-jazz replaced Communism as a preoccupation of the rebellious British. I well remember the nineteen-forties heyday of British Communism, a set of beliefs that electrified the intellectual upper middle class English, but had no appeal for the working class. Among the Celts of Wales and Scotland, however, cloth-capped working men eagerly embraced the message of Marx. Twenty years later, Communism had all but vanished. The new generation of intellectual upper-middle class English had gone crazy over blues, as had the young working men of Celtic Ireland and Scotland. Like "folk music", the Blues of Britain, however well-played, is a game of "let's pretend".

Blues-like music can often be heard, none-the-less, pouring from the doors and windows of London's evangelical West Indian churches. Not only do the young Black British buy and copy "gospel tapes" from the familiar Southern firms of Malaco, Ichiban and Maison de Soul, but there is a Negro Spiritual tradition in the West Indies itself. After the American War of Independence, Royalist slave-owners left the former British colonies for the British West Indian islands. There, with slaves complete, they made a new start. Both Christianity and spirituals were taught to Caribbean slaves by newly-arrived American slaves.

Today, spirituals are sung in most English-speaking West Indian islands, though the words have become somewhat garbled. Often only the chorus and not the verses remain. As in many American "black churches", these songs are

sometimes considered a trifle "low" or embarrassing in their "old-timeyness". All the same, immigrants have brought them to London, where I love to hear them. Unlike modern gospel songs, spirituals often resemble blues in structure, but have stuck at the three lines and a punch-line standard.

A song often heard in churches is "This Train is Bound for Glory", a rocking three lines and a punch-line spiritual, also popular among white "folk singers". It was disconcerting for me to hear the church version for the first time, as for the congregation the song was *real* and those who missed the train were believed doomed to hellfire.

"This song tells us what we may or may not do, if we are to make it in to Heaven", a Sister announced sternly.

On the 19th of August, 1995, I saw a line of "Church Sisters" standing by the seashore at an outdoor baptism. Softly and rapidly they sang a blues-like "chorus" in great solemnity.

Jordan river chilly and cold!  
Jordan river chilly and cold!  
Jordan ri-iver chilly and cold,  
Chills the body but not the soul!

Exactly a week later, on the 26th August, I was sitting in a little hall in London's East End, listening to a "programme", or homespun concert, of a Jamaican evangelical church. Strict Sister Palmer was the Moderator, and among the groups under her command was a cheerful six-woman choir of kindly middle-aged women in white, with bright red headshaws. During a "sketch" involving the conversion of a worldly domino-player, they had circled the hall chanting "Witness! Witness! Witness for my Lord!"

Suddenly, as the notes of a "hymn-book song" died away, they were up at the front and shouting, "Sit Down Sister!" was their cry, a song from the Golden Age of spirituals. With great verve, one Sister sang out a question three times, answered in chorus by the other five, facing her in a bunch, dancing on the spot and leaning urgently forward.

Solo: Who's that yonder, dressed in white?  
Who's that yonder dressed in white?  
Who's that yonder dressed in whi-i-ite?

All: Must be the children of the Israelite!

Solo: Oh, won't you sit down?

All: Lord, we can't sit down!  
'Cos we've just got to Heaven and we can't sit down!

Brimful of questions and answers, the familiar song rolled on.

Who's that yonder dressed in red?  
Who's that yonder dressed in red?  
Who's that yonder dressed in re-e-ed?  
Must be the children that Moses led!  
  
Who's that yonder dressed in black?  
Who's that yonder dressed in black?  
Who's that yonder dressed in bla-a-ack?  
Must be the children that are turning back!  
  
Oh, won't you sit down?  
Lord, we can't sit down!  
Won't you sit down?  
Lord, we can't sit down!  
Won't you sit down?  
Lord, we can't sit down – 'cos we've just got to  
Heaven and we can't sit down!

“Hmph!” announced Strict Sister Palmer, the Moderator. “That’s not a song, it’s a spiritual, but I suppose it’s quite nice. It brings back the old days in Jamaica.”

Meanwhile, back in Texarkana, what happened at Jimmy “The Preacher” Ellis’s Lounge? Unfortunately, I can’t tell you much, as I had to leave before the main dancing crowd arrived. Otherwise I would have been locked out of the Hotel Grim.

“If you come back next year, I’m gonna try an’ learn to do Rap by then”, Jimmy promised. He stood in the doorway and watched me out of sight as I walked off down the empty road, my shoes knocking two lines and a punch-line.

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*Publisher's Note:*

*Sadly, since the above was written Ichiban Records has folded, and Gary “Blues Boy” Coleman has died.*

